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Talking Heads: psychodramas you can dance to

New Wave enters the Top Thirty

By Mikal Gilmore

NEW YORK

THE SCENE THAT'S CHURNING ON this sweltering night at Irving Plaza, a Polish youth hall turned New Wave juke joint, is about to take a rousing twist. For nearly two hours, Talking Heads, in a hometown kickoff for a nationwide tour, have been plying the liquor-gorged crowd with a display of rock & roll that brings to mind a mating of Stax/Volt and R.D. Laing. Like the songs on their recent Top Thirty anomaly, *Fear of Music*, the Heads' performance is an obsessing coalition of muscular rhythms and minimalist melodies, capped with songwriter David Byrne's yelping fits about dialectics and paranoia.

Now, Tina Weymouth, the elfin bassist, changes the tempo into a steady, thumping pulse, and the band vaults into the much-adored "Psycho Killer." The song swacks Irving Plaza like a catharsis, converting floor and stage into a communal psychodrama.

Byrne steps into the opening verse with an edgy monotone that portends a tempest: "I can't seem to face up to the facts," he intones. "I'm tense and nervous and I can't relax/ I can't sleep 'cause my bed's on fire/Don't touch me I'm a real live wire." With his jolting movements and clamorous vocals, Byrne resembles a gaunt, dread-stricken figure bounding to life out of an Expressionist painting, while Weymouth, drummer Chris Frantz (wife and husband) and keyboard player Jerry Harrison buttress him like serene architecture.

Every time Byrne convulses or looks ready to slip into a petit mal, the floor roars jubilantly in approval—as if they're cheering Tony Perkins in *Psycho*'s shower sequence. At the back, where I'm standing, pockets of the place waver and collide in lurid disco formations, while a few of the more artistic types lurch and jig like *Dawn of the Dead* extras. Maybe it's the Heads' incessant, full-bottom [*Cont. on 20*]

Talking Heads (from left): Frantz, Byrne, Weymouth, Harrison

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MUSIC INDUSTRY NEWS

[*Cont. from 18*] Ed Rosenblatt, senior vice-president of Warner Bros. Records, Fleetwood Mac's label. "But we think this record is going to bring him back into the store the next day with more money."

Rosenblatt said that Warners has already received reorders for the album. The company's initial shipment, estimated at between 1.5 and 2 million sets, was the largest in its history.

Mercury cuts back

IN A MOVE PROMPTED by economic necessity and a desire to restructure the label, Mercury Records fired almost two dozen employees early last month. The dismissals included the company's entire West Coast publicity department and its New York A&R man.

"The bottom kind of fell out on us," said Mercury President Bob Sherwood. "Like everybody else, I had to make some adjustments. Unpleasant as it is, this isn't a limousine world anymore."

But Sherwood flatly denied a recent item in the *Hollywood Reporter* that said the company had lost $10 million in the past year and would soon fold, shifting its artists to other Polygram-distributed labels. The Mercury president said he was "outraged" by the report, adding, "I just wish I had that much money to lose."

In a realignment that followed the firings, Mercury hired John Stainze, an A&R man who signed Dire Straits to the English Phonogram label. Stainze will be based in Los Angeles. In addition, Mercury hired two persons to take the place of the ousted four-person West Coast publicity staff.

Mercury artists, however, seemed to accept the firings as business necessities. According to Al Dellentash, comanager of Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes, the Jukes felt no effects of the cutbacks; new singer/songwriter Rob Grill says, "I haven't lost any faith in the company yet. I won't do that unless they don't get me a hit."

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[*Cont. from 9*] rhythm, or just the gummy heat, but most of us here are seriously wagging booty to a song about *snapping* — and that's a hell of a mess to dance around.

THE PARADOX ISN'T lost on Byrne, who sits moments later at a small, smudgy table in a crowded upstairs dressing room. I've been forewarned to expect a painfully shy, elusive man, and in fact, during our brief exchanges so far, he's seemed as wary as a hare. It's hard to believe the same person can be so confident and stormy onstage. Now, when I mention the fleshly response "Psycho Killer" elicited, he issues a reedy laugh and contemplates me for a moment from under thick, animate eyebrows.

"When that was the song that drew all the attention, it used to bother us," he says. "But we rationalized it by telling ourselves that it was that driving meter of the bass line and chord changes that had the appeal." In contrast to his yelping, inflective singing, Byrne speaks in a somnolent voice, punctuated with frequent yanks and stammers. "I realize now," he continues, "that the idea of a personality close to the edge has something to do with the song's attraction. I don't mean that in a sensational way — it's just a normal human attraction for something a little out of the ordinary."

Watching Byrne convulse his way through a performance — or even talking to him, for that matter — one could easily get the impression that this lanky, high-strung entertainer just might have special knowledge of "a personality close to the edge." Indeed, that type of character is so frequent to Byrne's songs that it's sometimes a little hard to tell where persona ends and personal begins.

On Talking Heads' first two albums, *Talking Heads: 77* and *More Songs about Buildings and Food*, Byrne forged a brainy, expressive, disoriented character reeling in the schisms between conformity and alienation, aberrance and normality. With *Fear of Music*, though, he seems to have adopted the position that anxiety *is* normality. The stunner is the voice in "Drugs": "Feels like murder but that's alright/Somebody said there's too much light/Pull down the shade and it's alright/It'll be over in a minute or two."

Now, sitting with Byrne, I'm curious what he would say if I asked about his much-ballyhooed flirtation with neurosis. Finally, I decide that it seems too premature for the question. Instead, Jerry Harrison — the impish-looking keyboard player [*Cont. on 23*]

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[*Cont. from 20*] and, along with Byrne and producer Brian Eno, a chief architect of Talking Heads' sound — joins the conversation. I ask the two about "Animals," a hilarious, distraught disclaimer of God's furry creations and one of the few *Fear of Music* songs the band doesn't do live. "The music to that is in some tricky meters," says Harrison. "We have trouble playing them and singing at the same time. Also, that's one song you either like or don't like; people have strong attachments to their pets."

Harrison goes on to relate a story Tina told him about a married couple who brought their dachshunds along on a trip to Hong Kong. One evening they took the dogs out for a walk, then stopped at a restaurant with a sign reading, CHECK YOUR ANIMALS AT THE DOOR. About half an hour later they discovered, to their nausea, that it was a restaurant where you brought your own entrees.

Byrne chortles hard at the story. "I thought of 'Animals' in terms of the 'noble savage,'" he says, still laughing. "Animals and primitive people are always thought of as innocent savages, free of problems. It's about time somebody debunked *that* one."

AN ALBUM ABOUT paranoia and displacement is a fairly unusual package to be found scaling *Billboard*'s Top Thirty, yet *Fear of Music* — easily Talking Heads' riskiest effort — is the group's fastest-selling record to date. To a large degree, their success has to do with a point the band put across in last year's hit version of Al Green's "Take Me to the River": Talking Heads' music is nothing if not danceable.

"What appealed to me initially about their music was its powerful structural discipline," says producer Brian Eno, rock's leading experimentalist and founding member of the original Roxy Music (one of the Heads' models). "In the Talking Heads, the rhythm section is like a ship or train—very forceful and certain of where it's going. On top of that you have this hesitant, doubting quality that dizzily asks, 'Where are we going?' That makes for a sense of genuine disorientation, unlike the surface insanity of the more commonplace, expressionist punk groups."

Like Eno, the various members of Talking Heads migrated to rock from art school. David Byrne, whose introductions to the rock idiom at age fourteen were "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "Day Tripper" ("They gave me the impression that the purpose of my generation's music was to stretch boundaries"), attended the Rhode Island School of Design, where he studied Bauhaus theory (noted for its functional design) and conceptual arts. He also stirred some skepticism. On one occasion, he shaved his beard and long hair onstage, accompanied by an accordion player and a showgirl who displayed Russian cue cards. Another time, he attempted to write the ideal rock song, based on the results of a questionnaire he'd compiled.

"The art scene," he explains, "had started to seem elitist, aimed at a small band of initiates who knew what all the right references were. I thought the idea was to reach people and get feedback, so I started doing these questionnaires. People reacted strongly because it wasn't 'art-related.' They thought I was just some nut infiltrating the art community."

During his brief stay at RISD, Byrne met Chris Frantz, a painter and poet who enjoyed drumming to Miracles and Velvet Underground songs. In 1973, they formed an anomalous dance band called the Artistics, later rechristened the Autistics in honor of a second guitarist who had once been diagnosed autistic. The next year, Byrne moved to Greenwich Village, and when Frantz followed — along with girlfriend Tina Weymouth, another RISD alumnus — they elected to start a new band.

Something was clearly starting to foment in 1974 in New York's Bowery—most notably in the form of Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell's Television and Deborah Harry's the Stilletoes (later dubbed Blondie). But the budding leather crowd—estranged by Chris and David's wholesome collegiate looks—never responded much to the duo's quest for an R&B-style bassist, and Tina was finally enlisted. Says Chris: "We wanted someone who wasn't stylistically formed yet or obsessed with technical virtuosity. Plus we thought it was modern to have a female in the group who wasn't featuring her voice or breasts."

By their third show in August of 1975, the three had generated enough superlatives to reap the cover of the *Village Voice*, tagged with the headline, TIRED OF GLITTER? THE CONSERVATIVE IMPULSE OF THE NEW ROCK UNDERGROUND. Also about that time, they signed with Sire Records, a New York company that had taken the greatest initial interest in New Wave. Then, in early 1977, the group adopted its fourth member, Jerry Harrison, a Harvard architecture student and former keyboard player with Jonathan Richman's original Modern Lovers. "Before Jerry," says Byrne, "a lot of our songs were like sketches. Jerry made it possible for us to fill in some of the missing colors, and we became a real band."

Still, that "conservative" tag dogged the band's early steps, and when the Heads toured England with the Ramones—the same week the Sex Pistols released "God Save the Queen"—crowds booed whenever they played "Don't Worry about the Government." Says Bryne: "In rock, the normal point of view is exaggerated individuality, which is perfectly valid, but I thought it was more of a challenge to offer an opposing view. It had to do with the Chinese idea that uniformity and restriction don't have to be debilitating and degrading. I found that attractive."

THE EVENING AFTER the Irving Plaza show, I meet the group at — of all places—an athletic training center, where one of the photo sessions for this article has been scheduled. They chose this place because Tina was enamored with the weight room's interior: barren, off-white walls, confronted with gleeming, angular machines.

Jerry, Chris and Tina take to the equipment like pups, while David mostly keeps a watchful distance, as if the apparatus had appetites. It strikes me as a good metaphor for Talking Heads' music—an agitated presence in a composed environment.

But it also strikes me that sometimes that image can come off as distant and calculating, making for a band that, to its detractors, has seemed too arty and reserved to make credible rock & roll. I mention this to Chris and Tina over dinner later at a neighborhood Japanese restaurant. The couple—who were married in 1977, shortly after the first album's release — are erudite in a shy way, though when it comes to questions about the band's image, Tina is especially assertive.

"I realize some people think our music isn't exactly *heartfelt*," she says. "It's not that we try to be aloof or oblique; it's just that the ideas are a little unusual—not your typical love stuff. We've been criticized for using metaphors about efficiency and economy, but that doesn't mean there aren't real feelings behind them."

A troubled look has been forming on Tina's face. "*We* feel emotional about our songs," she continues. "But maybe other people just want us to explode. I think sometimes we almost do spin out of control—I feel like I'm driving a car very fast on a mountainous road. But some things are just too... *embarrassing* to do onstage." She looks to Chris for concurrence.

"I guess," he says, "the only thing we have going for us, besides our eccentricities, is our sound. Sometimes I imagine our whole purpose is to conceive of a song structure or rhythm that would be a breakthrough in music. Maybe get a little paragraph in some theory book. Sounds real corny, but that's kind of what I hope this group does."

Tina giggles proudly. "What we are," she says, "is a bunch of overachievers."

IT'S A QUESTION OF SEmantics," David Byrne says later when I ask him the same question about Talking Heads' image. "I think people confuse coldness and unfeelingness with the fact that we're aware of what we're doing. I know that may suggest arrogance or awkwardness, but I mean it in just the literal sense of being aware of what you're doing, like: '*Look at the funny place we're in; we're in front of people doing this.*' That might seem cold to some; to me, it just seems realistic."

Byrne is seated alongside Jerry Harrison in a rotating bar atop the Peachtree Plaza hotel in Atlanta, where the band officially starts its tour. We've been chewing over the question of image for several minutes, and I figure it's a fair platform for asking why, in past interviews, the band has disclaimed any suggestions that its music aspires to art.

Byrne shrugs doubtfully. "What bothers us about art rock," he says, "is the way other bands, like Emerson, Lake and Palmer, have construed it. They take something from a standard high-art context and try to make it palatable for mass tastes. We don't see ourselves as trying to simplify highfalutin ideas, then slip them over on our audience."

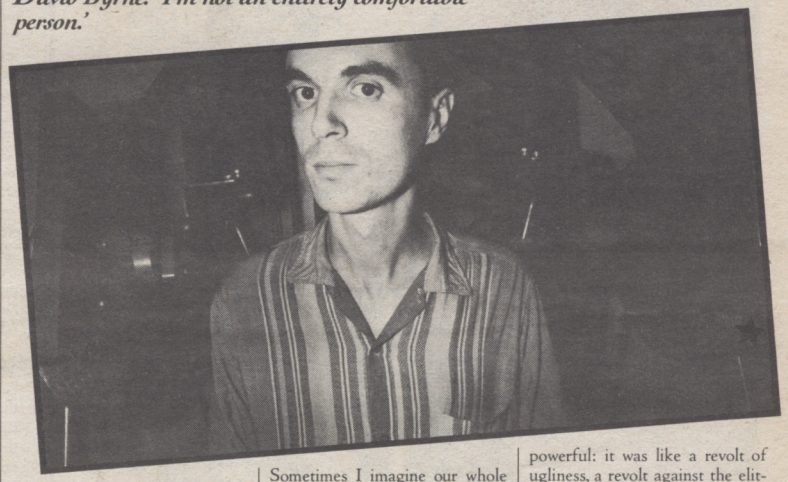
"Every once in a while," says Harrison with a scornful smile, "we'll meet some artist who says, 'I think using rock & roll for your art form is *brilliant*.' I find that repellent. If anything, rock & roll should fit the proletarian view of art, which is partly what made punk so powerful: it was like a revolt of ugliness, a revolt against the elitism of aesthetic beauty. I think there are some deep differences between rock & roll and art."

Does that mean that high art and popular art are irreconcilable?

"Well," says Byrne, "the only reason to listen to somebody like Stockhausen is to see if there are any interesting ideas that aren't in pop songs." He pauses. "We're in a funny position: it wouldn't please us to make music that's impossible to listen to, but we don't want to compromise for the sake of popularity. It's possible to make exciting, respectable stuff that can succeed in the marketplace."

Later, during the Heads' concert at Atlanta's Agora club, Byrne proves his point resoundingly. From the opening — when they catapult into "Artists Only" with the ejaculation, "I'm painting: *I'm painting again!*" — it's as visceral a display as is called for in rock & roll. Byrne and Harrison interweave peppered and eruptive bursts of melody that skitter madly across Chris and Tina's immutable, mesmerizing rhythm lines. But in spite of Jerry and David's disclaimers, I feel very much that

David Byrne: 'I'm not an entirely comfortable person.'



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Talking Heads

what I'm watching has a foot in art—sinewy, rumbling, kinetic art.

BACK AT THE PEACHtree, Byrne and I meet in his room for a final interview. It's four a.m., and vodka and orange juice have done much to anoint our rapport. After about an hour's discussion on the making of *Fear of Music* (the title, Byrne says, refers to a disease called musicogenic-epilepsy, which throws its victims into fits whenever they hear music), it occurs to me that beneath his nervous exterior, Byrne seems extraordinarily self-possessed and lucid. He reminds me of a shy, youthful prodigy who lives in mental and emotional realms of a different order than his peers. Sometimes a disturbed face is a DO NOT DISTURB mask.

I decide this time is as good as any to ask if it troubles Byrne that so many critics—and much of his audience—see him as a twin of the characters in his songs.

Byrne looks enlivened by the suggestion. He laughs stoutly, then says, "I haven't done many interviews recently, but when I do, I make it a point to mention that I've never seen a psychiatrist." He takes a drink, then laughs again.

"I'm not an entirely comfortable person. In fact, I admit to being extremely shy at times. But that isn't necessarily neurotic. Actually, I find it unfortunate that people use so much psychology jargon when they write about me and my songs. I'm skeptical because so many people view psychoanalysis as a valid interpretation of how people operate. I tend to see my own viewpoints and behavior as sensible reactions to the goofy things around me."

Byrne gets up and tosses fresh ice into his cup. "In order to play a particular character, you have to make yourself believe in the plausibility of his actions or ideas. I couldn't write a song that I didn't think was plausible."

Yet some of those characters, I offer, can seem pretty unfeeling, like the one in "I Don't Believe in Love" who sings, "I believe someday we'll live in a world without love." I feel like an interloper, but the question begs to be asked: "Do *you* believe in love?" Byrne waits several seconds before answering. "The unfortunate thing about love," he begins, "is that the term itself covers so much: erotic love, humanitarian, Platonic. . . .

"All those things happen to me, although I'm not running around looking for someone, at the moment, to fall in love with. I guess that's unfortunate in a way, but it's a decision I've made. I really enjoy what I'm doing; it has first priority. It's not that I want to keep my distance or be aloof from people—there are people whose company I enjoy a lot, who I feel real close to, but if the relationship degenerates into love and infatuation, it can ruin that. I think it's a myth that you always have to get sex out of your system.

"Sometimes it's a form of love just to talk to somebody that you have nothing in common with, and still be fascinated by their presence."

I LEAVE THAT LAST CONversation feeling both moved and bewildered by Byrne's sense of stoicism. In the end, I figure that the man in the songs and the man in the room probably aren't all that dissimilar; like Salinger's Seymour Glass, Byrne probably finds enlightenment in an attitude that somebody else might call a state of dissociation.

These thoughts take a final twist when I see Talking Heads a couple of weeks later at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles. Their performance is staggering. Byrne shimmies and shuffles around the stage like a colt having a flashback,

Tina Weymouth: 'What we are is a bunch of overachievers.'

and Harrison, Weymouth and Frantz back him doggedly. By the time they reach the first encore, "Life during Wartime," the audience has gone gaga. They leap to their feet, yell along on the credo chorus line — "*This ain't no party, this ain't no disco/This ain't no fooling around*" — and break into a disco frenzy, just like the Irving Plaza crowd during "Psycho Killer."

Maybe we're missing the point, b..t it's a party if I've ever seen one. Or maybe that *is* the point: Talking Heads' music evokes paradoxes in the same motion that it deflates them. A song about paranoid delusions—or, for that matter, snapping—is probably nothing to celebrate, but a song with a seismic beat *is*. Along the same lines, Byrne may champion repression in some of his songs, but his music incites release. It purges anxiety by bringing it to the surface.

Actually, very little of this crosses my mind while watching Byrne. Instead, I just dance and revel in the idea of this guy twitching and yelping his unlikely way into the mainstream of America's music. It's the best I've danced in years. ♫